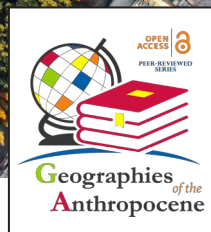


GLOBAL THREATS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: FROM COVID-19 TO THE FUTURE

Leonardo Mercatanti - Stefano Montes (Editors)

Foreword by Paul Stoller

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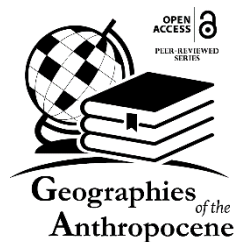


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Leonardo Mercatanti

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The book series “Geographies of the Anthropocene” edited by Association for Scientific Promotion “Il Sileno” (Il Sileno Edizioni) will discuss the new processes of the Anthropocene epoch through the various worldviews of geoscientists and humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences,

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Foreword: Bush/Village/Anthropocene

Paul Stoller
West Chester University

When times are troubled, Songhay people in Niger and Mali look to the bush for solutions. For them, the world is divided into the bush, the wild, untamable and uninhabited wilderness, and the village which is the settled, rule-governed space of social life. In the bush you confront unimaginable and unrivaled power. In the village the fragility of the life-cycle imposes limits on the capacity for living. If trouble comes to the village, Songhay elders like to say, it's because people have demonstrated disrespect for the bush. The relation of bush to village, then, has much to teach us about being human in the Anthropocene. It has much to teach us about how to secure our future in increasingly troubled times. As the contributors to *Global threats in the Anthropocene: from COVID-19 to the future* suggest in clear-sighted and powerfully articulated essays, the "global bush" is looming over the "global village" each and every day, threatening us with nothing less than extinction (See Stoller nd1; nd2).

I recently participated in a seminar the subject of which was the phenomenology of looming. The presenter, Jason Throop, discussed his experiences at the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic. In a forthcoming essay, Throop eloquently discusses the impact that COVID-19's looming presence had on himself and his family. (See Throop forthcoming.) During the ensuing discussion, the participants tried to define the indeterminate fuzziness of "looming." For me, "looming" always brings to mind an image of a gathering wave of dust in Tillaberi, Niger, a wave of dust that is slowly but inexorably coming to engulf people, including me, in a towering cloud that eclipses the sun.

The COVID-19 pandemic is like a series of dust waves that are crashing down upon us. These dust waves are choking our future. We find ourselves today in a perilously stressful state. COVID-19 is everywhere and is going nowhere. Despite the increasingly rapid rate of highly effective vaccinations, there are new, more contagious and deadly variants of the virus that are spreading widely in Europe, North America, South Asia and South America.

What's more, COVID-19 fatigue is now the new norm. Tired of social-distancing protocols, people are taking risks. People are like resisting

vaccination a decision that could endanger not only themselves and their loved ones but also strangers they might encounter at a restaurant, a grocery store, or an airport. And who is to say that COVID-19 is a singular phenomenon? Given the ongoing degradation of the natural world, we can probably expect another virus to jump from the bush, as Songhay people like to say, to the village.

But the stressful realities of COVID-19's robustness are only part of the picture. There are other troubles in the world. In western Niger, the remote and poor region of the world where I conducted many years of anthropological research, the countryside is overrun with violence. Islamists loot small villages and demand protection tribute from farmers, who, if they're lucky, earn \$300 a year. If the peasant farmers don't comply, the Islamists kill them. In May of 2020, they killed 20 people in a Western Niger village that I know. In early 2021, they killed 100 villagers in the same region. What had been a poor place graced with gracious conviviality and beautiful ceremony is now beset with religious intolerance and the violence of hate.

Sadly, these trends are widespread. In the U.S. there is no shortage of systematic racism, ethnic discrimination, hateful violence, income inequality, and, of course, coronavirus infections, hospitalizations, and deaths—all of which creates ever-present anxiety and stress—especially if you are neither white nor Christian. If you combine these elements, which are inextricably linked, we are all standing in the path of looming waves of dust that relentlessly overwhelm us. In this troubling existential state, we are immobilized. Our lives flash before our eyes. What must we do to confront and adapt to these ever-looming waves of dust? (See Stoller, 2021).

As the contributors to *Global threats in the Anthropocene: from COVID-19 to the future* make clear, our contemporary state of emergency can be traced to the longstanding culture of extraction, the fundamental tenet of which is that human beings can dominate nature and one another. Since the Industrial Revolution, human beings have extracted from nature such wonders as fossil fuels, minerals, trees, and water. In doing so, we have depleted the Earth's natural resources and produced polluting agents that have brought on the death of forests and the degradation of rivers, oceans, coral reefs, and landscapes—all in the name of progress and capitalism.

Extraction also creates regimes of mastery, compelling states and/or individuals to exercise a "will to power" to establish and maintain social and political domination. The "will to dominate" has brought us incessant warfare, famine, disease, inequality, racism, and the aforementioned violence of hate. Even in the sciences and social sciences, we extract

principles, formulas, categories, definitions, and theories from the free flow of experience, all of which provide a sense of control and certainty. We study. We know. We understand—or think we understand.

In their revolutionary and insightful book, *Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human*, Morton and Boyer (2021, p. 62) write:

Because mastery, transcendence, excess—that is the world that we know. Those are the qualities of this era. And with the refinement of excessive mastery in various localities has emerged relentless predatory impulses—monotheistic, capitalistic—to bring the world into alignment with our transcendence mission. An imploded form of subjectivity is worth considering as an antidote. One that is denser, but also more aware of the architecture of its density and of the gravitational forces that hold it together, one that is not constantly seeking the beyond.

Put another way, we can say that the practice of mastery underscores the illusory belief that the village can master the bush.

Indigenous people like the Songhay of Niger and Mali understand that the bush is always more powerful and dangerous than the village. If the forces of the bush are not respected, they bring drought, floods, destruction, diseases like COVID-19, and death. If you attempt to master the bush, as a Songhay proverb states, it masters you.

For Songhay people, who live in harm's way day in and day out, there is little control and no certainty. Most Songhay people have learned to accept their existential limits and live fully within them, which, in the end, enables them to live robustly in profoundly challenging physical, economic, and political circumstances. (See Stoller, 2014; See also Jackson, 2011) Wise Songhay elders say that to protect the village from the excessive power of an all-consuming bush, villagers need to practice more modesty, creativity, flexibility, and playfulness, and less certainty, mastery, and domination. Considering the aforementioned ramifications of the Anthropocene, it may well be prudent to adopt such counsel.

In the end the incisive contributions in *Global threats in the Anthropocene: from COVID-19 to the future* give me hope. Indeed, our extractive past may well have led us to the edge of extinction, but if we allow ourselves to follow the practices of wise indigenous elders, our future could become a truly human one.

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THE AUTHORS

Martin Bohle is affiliated with the Ronin Institute for Independent Scholarship (Montclair, NJ, USA). He cooperates with the International Association for Promoting Geoethics (Rome, Italy) and Edgeryders (Brussels, Belgium). Martin Bohle retired in 2019 as manager of EU science programs. From 1991-2019 he worked at the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission. After graduating as Physical Oceanographer (Diploma 1980, University Kiel, Germany), he obtained a Docteur ès Sciences at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédéral de Lausanne (Switzerland) in 1986; studying the dynamics of Lake Geneva. Then, he researched coastal seas at the University of Hamburg (Germany). His passions are societal geosciences, the geophysical fluid dynamics of oceans, seas, lakes and rivers, and sustainable development paths. During the last decade, Martin Bohle frequently published about ‘human-biogeosphere intersections’ such as geo-societal practices (citizen science, governance arrangements, narratives) and intricate notions such as Anthropocene, Noosphere, sense-making or engineering.

Christine Bonardi is Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at the University of Nice Côte d'Azur, co-director of the master in Psychosocial Engineering, Work Psychology and Human Resources (IPPTRH) and lecturer in the masters Integrative Clinic and Aging (CIV) and Clinical Psychology, Vulnerabilities and Development of Psychotrauma (CVDPT).

Member of the Laboratory of Anthropologies and Clinical, Cognitive and Social Psychologies (LAPCOS) and of the EUR (Ecole Universitaire de Recherche) Odyssee, his work themes concern a) the vulnerabilities associated with critical events and episodes in people's lives and groups (terrorism, pandemics, personal accidents, threats, diseases, etc.); b) social norms, values and representations; c) positive psychology with regard to human strengths and resources.

Francesco Caudullo, PhD in “Profiles of citizenship in the construction of Europe” (Contemporary history), former researcher and project manager of the “F. Braudel” Research Center of University of Catania, currently chief documentalist of European Documentation Center (EDC) of

University of Catania, he is the author of numerous articles and essays on the themes of globalization, immigration, Mediterranean and the policy of European Union. Among his most recent publications, in addition to the book written with Giulio Sapelli “La dottrina Obama e le sue conseguenze. Gli Stati Uniti e il mondo, un nuovo inizio?” (GoWare, 2016) and the Bruno Amoroso’s “La depredazione del Mediterraneo. Irresponsabilità dell’Europa, capitalismo predatorio e guerre per il dominio nel XXI secolo” (GoWare, 2016), should be noted “Emergenza globale, vita e crisi di sistema. Riflessioni oltre il COVID-19. Dietro la maschera dell’eccezione” (GoWare, 2020).

Daniele Di Tommaso holds a Ph.D. in Geopolitics and Geoeconomics from the Cusano University of Rome, Faculty of Political Science, with a thesis on the epistemology of geopolitics. He is a teacher of Italian linguistic, literary, history and geography at high school. He collaborates in the research with Anna Maria Pioletti, at the University of Valle d’Aosta. Di Tommaso D, Pioletti A. M., 2020, “Geopolitica dello sport nell’era della mondializzazione. Identità sportive nazionali tra tradizione e globalizzazione”, in G. Bettoni, A. M. Pioletti, *Geografia, geopolitica e geostrategia dello sport tra governance e mondializzazione*, Roma, Edizioni QUAPEG, pp. 289-325, doi: 105281/zenodo.4252626; Di Tommaso D, Pioletti A. M., 2020, *Le développement du football féminin en Italie: médiatisation, mondialisation et grande événement sportifs*, in André Suchet e Abderrazak El Akari (a cura di), *Développement du sport et dynamique des territoires. Experiences internationales comparées*. Clapier, Editions Afraps, pp. 219-228.

Federica Falancia, anthropologist and professor of law and political economy since 2003 in secondary school (Liceo Classico Galvani, Bologna). Starting from the field research carried out in the Sarayaku kichwa community in the Ecuadorian Amazon (2018/20), he is interested in the ecological aspects related to socio-environmental conflicts and the function of law as a language-bridge between different cultures. He has held seminars at the University of Ferrara (2013), the University of Fine Arts of Havana, ISA (2015) and the University of Bologna (2019). He drew up *Amicus Curiae* forwarded to ordinary courts and the Ecuadorian Constitutional Court in support of judicial cases between some Ecuadorian indigenous communities and the state.

Giuseppe Ferraro, PhD at the University of the Republic of San Marino, is a teacher of History and Philosophy at the secondary school. Since 2018 he is a member of the “Paolo Prodi” Study Center for Constitutional History (University of Bologna). Teaching Assistant at the University of Calabria and the University of Salento, he is part of the Scientific Committee of the Calabrian Institute for the History of Anti-Fascism and Contemporary Italy. He is a deputy of homeland history for Calabria, editor of the journals «Giornale di Storia Contemporanea» and «Rassegna storica del Risorgimento». His research has received important awards including: “Spadolini-Nuova Antologia” in Florence, “P.P. D'Attorre” in Ravenna, “Troccoli Magna Graecia” and “Amaro Silano” in Calabria. His monograph, “Il prefetto e i briganti” (Le Monnier-Mondadori) also received a special mention at the “Sele d’oro” award and was in 2017 among the five national finalists of the SISSCO Opera Prima. He collaborates with Treccani Biographical Dictionary of Italians. His activity also concerns the didactics of history and teacher training; in this context he is a member of the SISSCO national commission on history teaching and coordinator of the ICSAIC didactic commission. He is currently Director of the Institute for the History of the Italian Risorgimento, Provincial Committee of Cosenza.

Charlie Galibert (charlie.galibert@univ-cotedazur.fr) is a philosopher, anthropologist, writer, member of LIRCES EA 3159 Université Nice-Côte d’Azur. His research has concerned insularity, through its great tropes and figures: Ulysses, Robinson, Gulliver. Its current theme of reflection is otherness, understood under the two axes of Great Otherness (exteriority to Man: Nature, Being) and Minor Otherness (interiority of Man, intra human). He has delivered a hundred articles and contributions in national and international journals or collective works. He has published 6 anthropological essays and 6 novels to date. His latest book *L'Homme du Monde*, was published by Il Sileno Edizioni: <http://www.ilsileno.it/geographiesoftheanthropocene/monographic-volumes/>. He accompanies the work of the artist Armand Scholtès. (<https://www.armandscholtes.com/>). He contributed to the Decameron 2020 Project (<https://www.albiana.fr/blog/le-projet-decameron2020>), and, under several nicknames, to the “Borges Project” of the writer JP Toussaint (<http://www.jptoussaint.com/borges-projet.html>). He is currently working on the theme of art and genre.

Giorgia Iovino is Associate Professor of Geography at University of Salerno. Her activity has focused in recent years on three main research fields: environmental and sustainability issues, such as urban sprawl and land take, urban regeneration strategies; sustainable agricultural models; landscape analysis of urban, coastal and rural areas; territorial capital issue and its measurement. On these topics she has published many papers in books and class A journals.

Barbara Lucini (PhD in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research) is Senior Researcher at Itstime, Department of Sociology, Catholic University, Milan. She is Adjunct Professor of Risk Management and Crisis Communication at Catholic University, Milan. She is currently group leader of Converge - Covid - 19, Itstime working group: COVID-19 and Viral Violence (<https://www.itstime.it/w/converge/>). She has been involved in the scientific coordination of several research projects (European and non-European) focused on crisis management, risk communication, risk perception, security, resilience, radicalization and extremism. She is the author of several publications and of "Disaster Resilience from a Sociological Perspective Exploring Three Italian Earthquakes as Models for Disaster Resilience Planning", Springer International Publishing, 2014; "The Other Side of Resilience to Terrorism A Portrait of a Resilient-Healthy City", Springer International Publishing, 2017.

Livio Perra (lperra@uniss.it), was born in Cagliari (Italy) on 18th October, 1987. Law Degree, University of Cagliari, 2011. Postgraduate Specialization Diploma for Legal Professions, University of Cagliari, 2013. Adjunct Professor of Labour Law, University of Sassari, a.y. 2016/2017. Adjunct Professor of Institutes of Criminal Law and Juvenile Law, University of Sassari, a.y. 2017/2018. Adjunct Professor of Labour Law, University of Sassari, a.y. 2017/2018. Adjunct Professor of Cultural Heritage Legislation, University of Sassari, a.y. 2019/2020. Adjunct Professor of Cultural Heritage Legislation, University of Sassari, a.y. 2020/2021. Associate Researcher, V Nucleus, Democracy, International Law and Human Rights of the São Paulo International Human Rights Center of the São Paulo Law Academy, affiliated to the Chair San Tiago Dantas,

Biennium 2019-2021. Author of various articles in national and international peer reviewed journals. Serve as referee in national and international peer reviewed journals

Teresa Perra was born in Cagliari on 12th September, 1992. She graduated in Medicine and Surgery at University of Cagliari on 20th February, 2018. Resident in General Surgery at University of Sassari. Local lead and PI of COMPASS study - Management of COMPLicAted intra-abdominal collectionS after colorectal Surgery for Clinica Chirurgica, A.O.U. Sassari. Member of CovidSurg, global collaboration focusing on COVID-19 in surgery, organized by University of Birmingham. Member of Young BJS and WMA. Winning data curator “for curating the highest number of articles at a consistent quality” (Stint 1) for PanSurg - REDASA, organized by Imperial College London. Member of local, national and international research groups in the surgical field. In addition to surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic, my research activities mainly focus on hepatobiliary, pancreatic and colorectal surgery. Author of scientific articles published in high-impact international journals. Reviewer for Journal of Clinical Medicine. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7032-1289>.

Andrea Perrone earned his PhD with a thesis entitled “Ernesto Massi or the Genesis of the Italian Geopolitics”. His studies focus mainly on the History of the Geography. He has to his credit numerous contributions in scientific journals and some essays dedicated to the Geopolitics.

Anna Maria Pioletti is Associate professor in Economic-Political Geography at the Department of Human and Social Sciences of the University of Valle d'Aosta. She is the University of Valle d'Aosta's representative in the UNISPORT network and regional trustee for the Italian Geographical Society. She coordinates the research group of the Association of Italian Geographers “Geography and Sport”. She is the author of numerous publications on the theme of sport: with Giuseppe Bettoni, 2020, *Geografia, geopolitica e geostrategia dello sport. Tra governance e globalizzazione*, Roma, Quaepeg, Doi: 105281/Zenodo.4252626; con Davide Cirillo, Egidio Dansero, 2018, “Torino e lo sport: uno sguardo geografico”, in P. Bondonio, E. Dansero, C. Genova (eds.), *La città e lo sport*. Torino 2015 e oltre, Milano, Franco Angeli; 2017, “Sport as a driver for local

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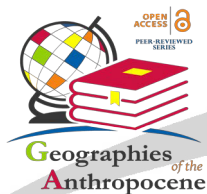
Giuseppe Reina is a PhD in 'Geography' with the thesis “A new landscape planning in Sicily: ecomuseums and community maps”; he attended the II level University Master in “Economics of Recovery and Enhancement of Cultural Heritage” at the “Higher Institute for Education of Excellence” of the University of Catania. Former project manager of the 'CeDoc' Research Center of the University of Catania, he has collaborated with public and private entities as an expert for European planning. He has published several scientific articles and among other things he edited for Marsilio “The ecomuseums: a resource for the future” with the introduction of Hugues De Varine. Member of the 'National network of ecomuseums', he is the promoter of the regional law on ecomuseums of the Sicily Region approved in 2014.

Giuseppe Terranova is a University lecturer in Political and Economic Geography. He is member of the editorial board of the French scientific geopolitical journal *Outre-Terre*. He is editor-in-chief of the Italian scientific journal of geopolitics *Overlandgeo*. He is member of the working group Migration and Mobility of the Italian Association of Geographers (AGEI). He is one of the coordinators of the Informed Public Debate working group of the Italian “Academy of Law and Migration” (Accademia Diritto e Migrazioni – ADiM). He has been Research Fellow at the European Center for International Affairs based in Brussels. He is author of English, French and Italian articles and monographs mainly on the following topics: the Geopolitics of International Migrations Flows; the Geopolitics of the Mediterranean Region; Human mobility and pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers food for thought and an opportunity for humanities and science scholars who research our global condition to collaborate. The 21st century society is facing an unprecedented challenge right now: what can we learn from this challenge? Will everything really return to what we used to define as 'normal' at the end of the emergency? Probably not. Structural changes from political, economic, social, and environmental perspectives are already occurring, and impacting the fields of health, education, commerce, governance and travel. Concepts of social space are being redefined and rethought at various scales. Our society, unprepared for a global health emergency of this scale, has been engaged only partially in practices of mitigation and sustainability and we now realize the fragility of our planetary existence. This volume collects 14 original chapters which analyse the new scenarios that could lie ahead in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis in an interdisciplinary context.

Leonardo Mercatanti teaches Geography of Cultural Heritage at the Department of Cultures and Society of the University of Palermo (Italy). Author of over 100 scientific publications, he is the Editor-in-Chief of "Geography, Culture and Society" book series (Nuova Trauben publisher, Turin). He is a member of several editorial and scientific committees of various scientific journals and series. He deals with environmental risk, the enlargement of the European Union, trade and American cultural geography. He was a member of the Steering Committee of the Association of Italian Geographers (A.Ge.I.).

Stefano Montes teaches Anthropology of language, Anthropology of migration and Anthropology of food at the University of Palermo in Italy. In the past, he taught in Catania, Tartu, Tallinn e and at Ciph (Collège International de Philosophie de Paris). He was the main investigator and director of a French-Estonian team in Tartu and, afterwards, in Tallinn. He publishes in several national and international journals. His work explores relationships between languages and cultures as well as between literary and ethnographic forms. Recently, his research has come to focus on migration and on daily life in a perspective linking together cognitive and agentive practices. More generally, strongly influenced by both semiotics and anthropological postmodernism, he investigates possible interconnections between these fields and disciplines. He is editor of the book series "Spaction" for the publishing house Aracne.



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